



The Psychology of Oppression: Marxist Insights into the Class Dynamics of O'Neill's Protagonists

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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which Eugene O'Neill's protagonists reflect the psychology of oppression and internalize class conflicts in a capitalist society. Utilizing Marxist literary theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the notion of alienation, the research examines how O'Neill's tragic vision reveals the imperceptible psychological ramifications of class domination—guilt, despair, false consciousness, and moral paralysis. This research analyzes plays such *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Desire Under the Elms*, demonstrating that O'Neill's theatre illustrates the internalization of social hierarchy and the human toll of capitalist alienation. The research indicates that O'Neill's protagonists are not only individuals in conflict but embodiments of a social struggle against an exploitative economic structure that molds consciousness, identity, and self-destruction.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, Marxism, Class Consciousness, Alienation, Oppression, False Consciousness, Psychoanalysis, Capitalism

1. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill's plays combine deep psychological study with sharp social criticism. His stage becomes a mirror of both the inner struggles of individuals and the outer conflicts of society. As critic Raymond Williams describes, O'Neill's theatre expresses a unique "structure of feeling" — a bridge between personal emotion and historical reality (*Culture and Society*, 1958, p. 256)[1]. O'Neill's characters carry heavy emotional burdens—guilt, longing, frustration—but these emotions are not just personal. They are shaped by the economic and social systems of their time. O'Neill wrote during the early 20th century, when America was changing rapidly. Factories were rising, cities were growing, and the working class was being reshaped by industrial capitalism. This new world created not only material progress but also emotional displacement and psychological confusion. As Terry Eagleton points out, modern writers must constantly face "the tension between interiority and ideology, between the self and the system" (*Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 1976, p. 64)[2]. O'Neill's heroes—like Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones*, and Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*—represent this exact conflict. They are both victims of capitalism and participants in its destructive power.

For O'Neill, tragedy is not simply about human weakness or sin; it is about how capitalism distorts human consciousness. His characters show what Karl Marx called alienation—the condition where a person becomes separated from his work, from other people, and from his true self. Marx explained this in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* when he wrote that "the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces... his labour becomes a commodity" (p. 72)[3]. O'Neill's characters experience this same paradox, but on a psychological level—they are emotionally exhausted by a world that turns their dreams and desires into tools of their own suffering.

In *The Hairy Ape*, for instance, the worker Yank sees himself as a part of the ship's engine—a symbol of industrial power. He believes he "belongs" to the system until a rich woman calls him a "filthy beast." That single insult destroys his illusion and exposes how deeply he has been dehumanized by class structure. As critic Louis Sheaffer observes, "Yank's tragedy lies not only in his social alienation but in his failure to understand the system that crushes him" (O'Neill: *Son and Playwright*, 1968, p. 233)[4]. In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill goes even further: Hickey's effort to make his friends face reality only ends in despair, showing that truth under capitalism can be unbearable without illusion—a dramatic version of Marx's idea of false consciousness.

O'Neill's plays suggest that oppression works from the inside out. It's not only about physical exploitation or poverty—it's about how people absorb the values of the system that



controls them. As Erich Fromm insightfully writes, “man becomes the instrument of his own enslavement when he makes the system’s demands his own desires” (The Fear of Freedom, 1942, p. 34)[5]. O’Neill’s characters fall into this trap: they suffer not because they are immoral or weak but because they have accepted society’s false ideals—individual success, self-reliance, and the pursuit of wealth—as measures of their worth. Seen through a Marxist lens, O’Neill’s protagonists reveal the failure of class consciousness. They sense injustice but cannot rise above it. They recognize parts of their oppression but remain trapped by the very system that defines them. Georg Lukács explained this perfectly when he said that “true tragedy begins when man becomes conscious of the forces that determine him, yet cannot change them” (The Theory of the Novel, 1920, p. 152)[6]. O’Neill’s heroes live in this tragic awareness—they see their suffering but cannot break free from it.

This paper therefore studies how O’Neill turns social oppression into psychological tragedy. It examines how his characters reflect the mental and emotional impact of capitalism using both Marxist and psychoanalytic perspectives. In doing so, O’Neill’s theatre becomes a powerful expression of Marx’s famous idea that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (The German Ideology, 1846, p. 67)[7]. His drama shows how deeply these ruling ideas invade human hearts and minds, shaping the very way people think, feel, and live.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Marxist Literary Perspective

Marxist criticism views literature not just as storytelling, but as a reflection of the economic realities and class hierarchies that shape human life. Thinkers like Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams expanded Karl Marx’s ideas, showing how art and literature serve as mirrors of society’s material conditions. They argued that plays, novels, and poems do more than depict the world—they reveal the underlying conflicts and contradictions of their time, especially those between the ruling and working classes. Literature, in this view, becomes a site where the struggles over power, labour, and ideology are dramatized and made visible.

Eugene O’Neill’s plays are powerful examples of how the stage can function as a microcosm of capitalist society. His settings—ships, bars, or family homes—often represent a miniature version of the modern industrial world, filled with tensions between labour and capital, aspiration and defeat, illusion and truth. For instance, in *The Hairy Ape* (1922), the protagonist Yank is a stoker in the engine room of a ship—a literal engine of capitalism. He sees himself as the force that drives the machine of modern civilization, but when Mildred, a wealthy woman, calls him a “filthy beast,” he becomes painfully aware of the class divide that defines his existence. The insult breaks his sense of belonging. Yank’s tragedy lies in his realization that he is alienated—cut off not only from society but from his own sense of purpose and humanity. His labour gives meaning to the world, yet the system denies him recognition as a human being.

Karl Marx’s concept of alienation perfectly captures Yank’s suffering. Under capitalism, Marx said, the worker becomes estranged in four ways: from the product of his labour, from the act of production, from other people, and from his own inner self. O’Neill transforms this idea into drama. Yank’s physical strength is his only identity, but once that identity is devalued by class hierarchy, he collapses into despair. The industrial system that needed his labour has also emptied his soul. He cannot connect to anyone—neither the rich who mock him nor the fellow workers who have become machine-like. His death at the end, crushed by the very industrial forces he once thought he controlled, becomes a symbol of how capitalism consumes the worker both physically and spiritually.

In *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), O’Neill turns from the factory to the saloon, but the Marxist themes persist. The bar is filled with men from the lower classes—failed salesmen, ex-labourers, petty criminals—who live in a haze of alcohol and illusion. Each of them clings to a “pipe-dream”: an imagined future success, a comeback, or a redemption that will never come. These illusions reflect what Marx called false consciousness—a state in which the



working class adopts the ideology of the ruling class, believing that success and happiness are achieved through individual effort and material gain. O'Neill exposes how this capitalist fantasy traps people in cycles of self-deception and misery. When the character Hickey arrives to "cure" them of their illusions, the truth is unbearable. Their lives, once built on hope, crumble into nihilism. This dramatizes how the capitalist promise of success ultimately alienates individuals from reality and from one another.

In both plays, O'Neill portrays a world where human relationships are mediated by economic systems. Love, friendship, and self-worth are commodified—they exist only through the lens of profit, productivity, or social value. The result is emotional emptiness. The characters' pain is not just personal—it is structural. They are what Raymond Williams would call "structures of feeling": human embodiments of a society struggling with industrialization, urbanization, and the moral decay of a market-driven world. O'Neill thus transforms Marx's theory of alienation into theatre. His characters are not villains or heroes; they are victims of a psychological capitalism—a system that reaches into their minds and shapes how they see themselves. The stage becomes a mirror of the modern world, where individuals are trapped in social roles that rob them of freedom and authenticity. In this sense, O'Neill's drama, like Marxist criticism itself, insists that personal tragedy and social injustice are inseparable. The despair of his characters reflects not moral weakness, but the crushing weight of a system that values profit over people, and possessions over the human soul.

2.2 The Psychology of Oppression

The concept of oppression in Eugene O'Neill's plays goes far beyond material deprivation or class hierarchy—it penetrates the inner life of his characters. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Erich Fromm have shown how domination works not only through external systems of control but also through internal psychological mechanisms. Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), describes how the oppressed absorb the language, desires, and ideals of their oppressors, believing that to be human is to imitate those in power. Similarly, Fromm, in *The Fear of Freedom* (1941), argues that people often escape the burden of freedom by submitting to authority and adopting the very ideologies that enslave them. O'Neill's characters embody this tragic paradox: they are enslaved by the values they most admire—success, wealth, respectability, and the illusion of self-made freedom.

In plays like *The Iceman Cometh*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill dramatizes this internalized oppression with painful realism. His characters do not simply suffer because society is unjust; they suffer because they have believed the lie that happiness and dignity come only through capitalist success or social approval. For instance, Yank in *The Hairy Ape* is destroyed when he realizes that the industrial system he serves has no place for him as a human being. Yet, even after this revelation, he cannot imagine life outside that system—his self-worth is tied to the very machinery that enslaves him. Likewise, in *The Iceman Cometh*, the barroom dreamers cling to their "pipe dreams" of success and redemption, ideals rooted in the American Dream, even though those same ideals have led to their ruin. Their illusions are their only comfort, yet also their chains. O'Neill uses these inner conflicts to show that oppression is both economic and emotional. Capitalism, as Marx suggested, alienates people from their labour and their essence—but O'Neill adds a psychological dimension. His characters internalize class structures as emotions: guilt for failing to succeed, shame for being poor or dependent, envy of those who "made it," and a haunting sense of unworthiness. Mary Tyrone's addiction in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, for example, can be read as a form of emotional escape from the relentless pressure to appear respectable and the guilt of not meeting social ideals. Her morphine habit mirrors a larger societal addiction to illusion—the need to hide despair under a façade of success and respectability.

2.3 Literature Review on O'Neill and Class Consciousness

According to Travis Bogard, O'Neill's theatre is "an exploration of man's attempt to find meaning in a mechanized world where his labor has become his prison" [8]. This statement



captures the essence of Marx's concept of alienation, which runs through O'Neill's work. In *The Hairy Ape*, for instance, the stoker Yank represents the worker whose sense of identity is destroyed by industrial capitalism. Critics like Stephen A. Black have emphasized that Yank's tragedy is not simply personal but "a symptom of a diseased social order that has reduced man to machinery" [9].

Raymond Williams views O'Neill's plays as a social mirror that exposes the moral emptiness of modern capitalist life. He argues that O'Neill's characters "embody the tension between self and society, between private dream and public exploitation" (*Culture and Society*, 1958) [10]. This view aligns with Marxist criticism, which treats literature as a reflection of class conflict and ideological contradiction. Similarly, Terry Eagleton maintains that O'Neill's drama "reveals the psychological scars left by class struggle and the illusion of freedom under capitalism" [11].

Other scholars have explored O'Neill's critique of the American Dream. According to Harold Bloom, O'Neill portrays the American Dream as a form of false consciousness—an illusion that blinds characters to their real social conditions [12]. In *The Iceman Cometh*, the "pipe dreams" that sustain the bar's patrons are seen as metaphors for the comforting lies that capitalism offers to the working class. Louis Sheaffer extends this idea, noting that O'Neill's characters "suffer not because of personal moral weakness, but because they have absorbed the very values that exploit them" [13].

3. O'Neill's Protagonists and the Psychology of Oppression

3.1 The Hairy Ape: Alienation and Industrial Dehumanization

In *The Hairy Ape* (1922) Eugene O'Neill presents Yank as the typical worker of modern industrial society—physically powerful but emotionally hollow. He works in the ship's stoke-hole, taking pride in his strength and rhythm with the engines. At the start he believes he "belongs," but this sense of belonging is really submission to the machine, not human connection. As Travis Bogard notes, "Yank's pride in his labor is the very chain that binds him to his servitude" (*Contour in Time*, p. 112) [14]. The turning point arrives when Mildred Douglas, a rich passenger, calls him a "filthy beast." That single insult breaks his illusion and forces him to see the class wall dividing him from people like her. It is the moment when false consciousness begins to crumble. Marx described this kind of awakening as the worker's first awareness of alienation—"the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces... his labor becomes a commodity" (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 72) [15]. Yank suddenly understands that he is not part of the powerful system he imagined; he is merely its fuel. After this shock, Yank's thoughts spiral. He wanders through the city searching for a place where he belongs, but every encounter deepens his loneliness. Stephen A. Black explains that "Yank knows enough to suffer, but not enough to resist" (*Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*, p. 147) [16]. His line, "I ain't part of de machine, I'm out of it," marks his painful step from ignorance to awareness. Unlike Marx's revolutionary worker, however, he cannot turn awareness into action. He accepts Mildred's judgment and measures his worth by the standards of those who despise him.

The final scene—Yank's encounter with the gorilla in the zoo—completes the metaphor. The cage represents the closed circle of industrial capitalism; the gorilla stands for the brute strength to which labor has been reduced. Louis Sheaffer calls it "the most vivid image of man's return to bestiality under industrialism" (*O'Neill: Son and Playwright*, p. 233) [17]. When Yank dies in the gorilla's grip, the image suggests that the system has consumed him entirely: a man turned back into an animal by the very engines he once served. Through Yank, O'Neill shows how capitalism not only exploits the body but erases human identity itself.

3.2 The Emperor Jones: Power, Illusion, and the Colonial Psyche

In *The Emperor Jones* (1920), Eugene O'Neill explores how class and racial oppression intersect within a capitalist and colonial framework. The play's protagonist, Brutus Jones, a former Pullman porter who declares himself emperor of a Caribbean island, becomes a tragic



symbol of how the oppressed often internalize the values of their oppressors. His rise to power is not liberation but imitation—a psychological copy of the white capitalist and imperial master. As Frantz Fanon later described in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the colonized man “adopts the language and manners of his oppressor in order to feel human, but in doing so loses himself” (Fanon, 1967, p. 18) [18].

Jones’s imitation of capitalist greed, pride, and cruelty reflects what Fanon called the colonized psyche—a mind that equates dominance with dignity. By wearing royal robes and demanding tribute from his subjects, Jones recreates the very hierarchy of exploitation that once enslaved him. Erich Fromm’s insight is relevant here: “The oppressed, seeking security, often become the mirror image of their oppressors” (*The Fear of Freedom*, 1942, p. 42) [19]. O’Neill captures this cycle of psychological enslavement—how power gained through exploitation is inherently unstable because it rests on fear rather than justice. As the play unfolds, Jones’s hallucinations in the jungle expose the breakdown of his false identity. Each vision drags him further into the past—first as a slave in a chain gang, then as a hunted fugitive, and finally as a terrified man facing ancestral ghosts. These scenes dramatize what Raymond Williams calls “the historical consciousness of oppression, returning through memory and myth” (*Culture and Society*, 1958, p. 262) [20]. O’Neill uses expressionistic technique to show Jones’s psychological regression—a movement backward through layers of history and guilt.

In one of the play’s most striking moments, Jones cries out, “For de Lawd’s sake, let me git dis silver bullet!” The line symbolizes both his desperate clinging to material power and his subconscious belief that only wealth or possession can protect him. Travis Bogard interprets this as “the final illusion of the self-made man—the belief that money and will can conquer history” (*Contour in Time*, 1972, p. 156) [21]. But in the jungle, stripped of his imperial costume, Jones is reduced to pure fear. His silver bullet, meant to prove control, becomes the very weapon that kills him. Jones’s descent into madness is both personal and historical. Personally, it is the collapse of a man who has built his identity on imitation and domination. Historically, it represents the return of slavery’s buried trauma—the haunting memory of racial and class subjugation. As Normand Berlin observes, “Jones’s jungle is not merely physical; it is the unconscious of history where the ghosts of oppression still live” (O’Neill’s *America: Drama and the Tragic Vision*, 1993, p. 85) [22]. By the end, O’Neill transforms Jones from emperor to victim, revealing that economic and racial oppression produce not empowerment but psychic terror. His ambition, born from a desire to escape humiliation, turns into self-destruction. O’Neill’s vision echoes Marx’s critique of false liberation—when the oppressed, instead of transforming the system, become its imitators. In this way, *The Emperor Jones* becomes a drama of psychological colonization, where material power cannot erase the wounds of class and history.

3.3 Desire under the Elms: Property, Possession, and Patriarchal Capitalism

In *Desire under the Elms* (1924), Eugene O’Neill transforms a New England farmhouse into a symbolic arena of capitalist possession—a place where land, love, and lineage are bound by the same logic of ownership. The play’s emotional and moral tensions revolve around property as power, showing how patriarchal capitalism distorts both human relationships and the natural world.

Ephraim Cabot, the aging patriarch, represents the spirit of early American capitalism: self-made, possessive, and spiritually hardened. His attachment to his farm is not affection but domination; he speaks of the soil as something he has “conquered with the sweat of his brow,” a phrase that turns labour into a moral justification for greed. As Raymond Williams notes, “O’Neill’s Cabot is not a farmer of the earth but a proprietor of souls” (*Culture and Society*, 1958, p. 266) [23]. Cabot’s religiosity strengthens this ownership: he equates his authority with divine will, believing that hard work and property are signs of God’s favour. In this way, O’Neill links patriarchy, religion, and capitalism as parts of one oppressive moral system. Eben, Cabot’s youngest son, becomes the embodiment of the new generation’s



rebellion against inherited power. He yearns for the land not for profit but for belonging; yet his desire is already tainted by the capitalist ideology he resents. Travis Bogard observes that “Eben’s revolt is shaped in the very image of what he resists—he covets possession as his father covets God” (Contour in Time, 1972, p. 189) [24]. His emotional and economic conflicts fuse when Abbie, his young stepmother, enters the household.

Abbie’s relationship with Eben introduces sexual and social rebellion into the rigid world of property. Their love is not just physical but symbolic of revolt against the patriarchal order. When Abbie declares, “It’s mine, the farm is mine—ours!” her words blur the line between passion and possession. Critics such as Virginia Floyd read this as “the most direct dramatization of love turned into property transaction” (The Plays of Eugene O’Neill: A New Assessment, 1985, p. 93) [25]. Theirs is a love born from defiance but trapped within the very language of ownership that defines Cabot’s world.

O’Neill layers the drama with Freudian and Marxist undercurrents. The erotic triangle of father, son, and stepmother mirrors the Oedipal struggle, but O’Neill gives it a socio-economic dimension. The son’s revolt against the father becomes an allegory of class conflict—an attempt by the exploited to reclaim what the patriarch has monopolized. As Stephen A. Black explains, “Eben’s passion for Abbie and the farm fuses the emotional hunger of the child with the economic hunger of the dispossessed” (Beyond Mourning and Tragedy, 1999, p. 174) [26]. The murder of their infant son forms the emotional climax of the play. In killing the child born of both love and greed, Abbie and Eben symbolically destroy the hope of reconciling affection with ownership. The child’s death exposes how capitalist desire corrupts natural emotion, turning love into guilt and inheritance into doom. Louis Sheaffer interprets this act as “the annihilation of human tenderness by the weight of property” (O’Neill: Son and Playwright, 1968, p. 301) [27].

By the final scene, O’Neill strips his characters of both wealth and illusion. The farm, once the symbol of power, becomes a prison. As Cabot walks away muttering that “the farm’ll outlast us all,” O’Neill leaves us with a stark Marxist truth: under capitalism, property survives while human beings perish. Desire, which once promised liberation, ends in despair because it is bound to possession. In *Desire Under the Elms*, O’Neill shows that the roots of tragedy are not only psychological but economic—that love itself cannot flourish in a world where everything, even emotion, is a form of property.

3.4 The Iceman Cometh: Illusion and False Consciousness

Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) is one of his deepest studies of how people survive under the weight of hopelessness and false beliefs. The story takes place in Harry Hope’s dark, decaying bar in New York, where a group of men and women live out their days drinking and dreaming. Each one of them has what they call a “pipe dream”—a comforting lie that helps them face another day. Some believe they’ll go back to work, others that they’ll make peace with family, or travel the world. But none of these dreams ever come true. They are illusions that keep them alive. As O’Neill writes, they are “all dead men who somehow keep on breathing.” Their illusions are what Karl Marx would call false consciousness—a way of thinking that keeps people trapped by the very system that exploits them.

When Hickey, a salesman and old friend, enters the bar, he brings what he calls “the truth.” He insists that everyone should give up their pipe dreams and face reality. At first, this sounds like liberation. Hickey declares, “The lie of the pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us!” Yet, the more he preaches, the more we realize he is the most deluded of all. He himself has killed his wife—believing he was freeing her from the false hope that he could ever change. Hickey’s “truth” turns out to be another illusion. His sanity collapses when he realizes that a life without dreams is unbearable. In the end, the bar’s regulars return to their illusions and their drinks, whispering, “To hell with the truth! It’s a rotten, lousy, damned lie!”



O'Neill uses this play to show how ideology—beliefs about success, redemption, and freedom—can become psychological prisons. The characters' "pipe dreams" reflect the myths of capitalism: if you try hard enough, you'll rise; if you believe, you'll succeed. When these dreams collapse, what's left is emptiness and despair. As the critic Travis Bogard noted, "The tragic necessity of illusion for survival in a world emptied of meaning" lies at the heart of this play. O'Neill seems to say that for the poor and broken, illusion is not weakness—it's a form of survival. When stripped of their comforting lies, these men confront a truth too painful to bear: that the system has drained them of hope, purpose, and dignity. In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill transforms Marx's idea of "false consciousness" into raw human drama. His characters are not villains or fools—they are lost souls who need their dreams to live, even when those dreams are lies.

4. Class, Ideology, and the Tragic Self

Eugene O'Neill turns Marx's materialist theory into emotional drama: class oppression becomes not only an external force but a state of mind. His people are not heroes but casualties of ideology—haunted by the illusion that worth is measured by what one owns or produces. In *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Yank's proud cry, "I'm de guy dat does it all! I move de world!" (Scene I, p. 22) captures the worker's faith in his labor as identity. Yet when Mildred Douglas recoils from him—"Oh, the filthy beast!" (Scene IV, p. 42)—her disgust shatters that faith. Alienated from both the industrial machine he powers and the bourgeois world that despises him, Yank gropes for belonging: "I ain't on oath and I ain't in heaven. I'm in de middle tryin' to seize somethin' out of dat noise an' muck an' smoke to make me know I exists." (Scene VII, p. 61). His words dramatize Marx's "fetishism of commodities": labor becomes an idol that dehumanizes its maker. By the end, crushed by the ape's embrace in the zoo, Yank becomes the literal beast capitalism imagined him to be—his rebellion consumed by the very system that defined him.

In *A Touch of the Poet* (1942), O'Neill moves from the engine room to the tavern but keeps the same ideological machinery. Major Cornelius (Melody) Con Melody, the fallen Irish landowner turned Yankee publican, clings to aristocratic illusion: "I was a gentleman once. I will die a gentleman, by God!" (Act II, p. 73). His uniform, mirror, and memories are fetishes of class—signs that substitute for substance. When his daughter Sara mocks him—"You and your dreams of grandeur make you a clown" (Act III, p. 98)—the mask cracks. Con's tragedy lies in the internalization of hierarchy; he despises his real self because ideology has taught him that dignity resides only in birth and property. O'Neill turns Marx's class structure into personal psychosis: the battle between "who I am" and "who I should be." Con's last gesture—saluting his mirror image as if it were a superior—embodies self-division: a man crushed by the weight of a dream sold to him by the ruling class.

Long Day's Journey into Night (1941–42) transforms the same struggle into domestic tragedy. James Tyrone defends his lifelong miserliness with the words, "I bought it for a song, and it was a good investment." (Act II, p. 74), revealing how even love has become a business transaction. His wife Mary, lost in morphine dreams, recalls the convent's purity—"The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too." (Act III, p. 98)—expressing the paralysis born from a life measured by false security. Their son Edmund names the truth O'Neill is after: "Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people." (Act IV, p. 122). The fog here is ideological: it hides class anxiety beneath the myth of the self-made man. In the Tyrone's home, capitalism has invaded the soul; affection turns to blame, and thrift to spiritual poverty. O'Neill shows that when money becomes morality, even family becomes a marketplace.

Across these plays, the external hierarchy of class merges with internal guilt, self-hatred, and paralysis. Yank dies seeking recognition; Con lives in denial of his own station; Tyrone's family drowns in the fog of false ideals. Each character oscillates between rebellion and submission, hope and despair—proof that ideology governs the psyche more ruthlessly than law or police. O'Neill's stage becomes the laboratory of the capitalist soul, where the



American dream mutates into nightmare. His vision makes Marx's insight visceral: under capitalism, human beings don't simply work—they are worked upon, until their consciousness bears the system's brand.

5. Conclusion

Eugene O'Neill's plays turn Marx's economic ideas into emotional, psychological experience. Instead of preaching politics, O'Neill shows how capitalism quietly enters the human heart—how people begin to think, feel, and even dream according to its values. His characters—Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones*, Eben in *Desire Under the Elms*, and Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*—all reveal different faces of this inner conflict. They are strong, hopeful, and human, yet each becomes trapped by the same invisible system of class, power, and desire. Through them, O'Neill exposes what might be called the emotional grammar of capitalism: alienation, guilt, false freedom, and despair. His stage becomes a place where social issues are translated into psychological pain. The working man's struggle for dignity, the colonized man's hunger for power, the son's rebellion against property, and the dreamer's loss of illusion—all show how deeply economic forces shape human identity. O'Neill reminds us that real liberation requires more than a change in social systems; it requires an awakening of consciousness. People must see how their private suffering often reflects the world's injustice—how their loneliness, shame, or ambition are not just personal flaws but products of social conditioning. As Raymond Williams once wrote, "Tragedy is never only private; it is the form in which society discovers its own wounds." Today, O'Neill's vision remains powerful. The same forces he wrote about—inequality, greed, competition, and spiritual emptiness—still define much of modern life. His plays continue to speak to audiences who struggle to find meaning and self-worth in a world driven by profit. In this sense, O'Neill's theatre is not only art—it is a form of resistance, a call to reclaim the human spirit from systems that try to own it.

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